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ABSTRACT

The purpose of this study was to determine the relationship between expectations of first-time parenthood and ease of transition into the role of parent. Respondents voluntarily completed questionnaires during hospital pre-natal classes or natural childbirth classes; post-natal questionnaires were mailed to respondents six weeks after the birth of their child. Both the pre-natal expectations and the post-natal ease of transition were measured by a 34-item checklist which tapped both positive and negative aspects of parenthood. A hierarchial, step-wise regression procedure was employed in order to examine separately the effects of expectations and control variables. Pre-natal expectations, age and education exhibited significant relationships with ease of transition, while education was negatively related. Expectations of an experience appear to be a strong determinant of the perception of that experience. It was suggested that this might be due to the self-fulfilling prophecy or to an attitudinal component of anticipatory socialization. (Author)

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THE EFFECT OF EXPECTATIONS ON THE TRANSITION TO PARENTHOOD

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There have been several studies on "the transition to parenthood"--taking on for the first time the role of parent (Beauchamp, 1968; Dyer, 1963; Hobbs, 1965, 1968; Hobbs and Cole, 1976; LeMasters, 1957; Meyerowitz and Feldman, 1963; Russell, 1974; Taylor and Garland, 1974). The results of these studies have been contradictory, with some leading to the interpretation that the birth of the first child constitutes a crisis for couples, and others not supporting this contention. Of these investigations, most have focused on the crisis aspect of the transition to parenthood and generally have used Hill's (1949) definition of crisis. He defined crisis as "any sharp or decisive change for which old patterns are inadequate" (p. 51).

The studies have focused on different variables, such as social class, age or race, to determine why a crisis is or is not experienced by first-time parents. However, the pre-natal attitudes and behavior of the prospective parents have not been considered as factors in their transition to parenthood, except for an occasional question or two concerning previous experience with children or formal education in related areas. Moreover, all but one of these studies analyzed the transition ex post facto. Though Meyerowitz and Feldman (1965) collected data both pre-natally and post-natally, the focus of their study was limited to marital satisfaction.

In this study, emphasis was placed on the pre-natal attitudes and behavior of prospective parents in order to attempt to delineate potentially significant factors in the assessment of the transition to parenthood. Additionally, this study attempted to utilize a conceptual framework of role transition.

"For role theorists, the social world is viewed as a network of variously interrelated positions, or statuses, within which individuals enact roles. For each position, as well as for groups and classes of positions, various kinds of expectations about how incumbents are to behave can be discerned" (Turner, 1974, 161). Role transition refers to the process of entering or leaving a social role (Cottrell, 1942, 691). Role transition ". . . is a change in the role expectations or norms that are revelant for an individual and hence a change in a set of behaviors" (Burr, 1973, 124). The role of parent is a social role, in which an individual conforms to general expectations of various social categories. The birth of a person's first child involves a role transition, as the individual enters the role of parent with its different expectations and behaviors.

Although the concept of role transition has been applied to the discussion of first-time parenthood, the relationship between the expectations of a role transition and the ease of the actual transition has not been examined.

However, there have been studies of the relationship of other pre-transition attitudes and post-transition adjustment. In a study of stress of patients facing major surgery, Janis (1958) found that pre-operative attitudes of the patients were significantly related to their reactions during the post-operative period. A similar investigation by Davids, Holden and Gray (1963) with pregnant women supported the relationship between pre-natal anxiety and post-natal adjustment to the parental role.

Focusing upon realistic-unrealistic expectations, LeMasters (1957, 1974) suggested that parenthood has been romanticized in our society. Because people are so poorly prepared for the reality of parenthood, those who are anticipating the birth of their first child do not have realistic expectations

of what parenthood will be like. It has been suggested (Mann et al, 1961) that realistic expectations about parenthood may facilitate the role transition.

> "However, on the basis of a well-organized picture of infant behavior, conceptualized in terms of the mother's role functions, expectant parents might be able to approach parenthood with a set of differentiated and, therefore, more realistic expectations. If each role function is anticipated and prepared for in terms of it intrinsic complexity and its special meaning to each new mother, the role transition may be facilitated" (p. 50).

Focusing on "realistic" or "unrealistic" expectations requires the researcher to compare each individual's perceptions with his or her circumstances to determine the extent to which the perceptions match with "reality." To avoid the problems inherent in approaching the issue from this dimension, this study focused on the positive-negative dimension of the subjects' expectations and perceptions.

Hypothesis: "There will be a positive relationship between pre-natal expectations, and ease of transition into the role of parent."

METHOD

In order to measure ease of transition into the role of parent, the parents' perceptions of the positive and negative experiences associated with this role were measured. It was assumed that a positive perception of the experience of parenthood indicated a higher degree of ease of role transition.

The questionnaire was based on those used by Hobbs (1965) and Russell (1974). Hobbs developed a checklist to measure degree of crisis associated with the birth of the first child; Russell fashioned a similar checklist to measure gratification. The items from these two chekclists were integrated in random order into a 34-item checklist which was used as the basis of both the pre-natal and the post-natal questionnaires. The checklist was

used pre-natally to measure expectations toward the parental role; it was used post-natally to measure ease of transition into the parental role.

Data were collected from parent classes at two hospitals in a medium-size city in a mid-western state. Each of the people who attended parent classes in January, February and March, 1975, was given a copy of the pre-natal questionnaire to complete voluntarily during the first session of the parent classes. Those respondents who had previously had a child were eliminated, as were three respondents who failed to fill out their names and addresses to allow a post-natal questionnaire to be mailed. Only five persons refused to complete the pre-natal questionnaire.

Six weeks after the birth of their child, the parents were mailed two copies of the post-natal questionnaire, along with a stamped, addressed envelope. Follow-up calls were made to couples who had not returned their questionnaires after two weeks. One hundred and thirty were mailed out and 61 were returned, yielding a final sample of 61.

An examination of the pre-natal responses of those who did not return the post-natal questionnaires revealed that they did not differ significantly from the final sample in terms of pre-natal attitudes and expectations. The mean value of the expectation scores for the respondents was 7.80$_4$ while it was 7.42 for the non-respondents ($t = 1.87$, $df = 123$). An earlier study comparing first-time parents who had attended parent classes and those who has not, also yielded no significant differences between the two groups (Mann et al., 1961).

The sample was comprised of 32 females and 29 males. The age range was from 19 to 32, while the mean and median ages were 24 and 25 years, respectively. While 19 of the subjects were not employed, 11 had blue-collar occupations and 31 were white-collar workers. Virtually everyone in the

sample had at least a high school education; almost half had completed only 12 years of education, but the range in educational level was from high school to Ph.D. Length of marriage at the time of the birth of the child ranged from eight months to eight years; the median, as well as the mean and the modal category, was 36 months.

Ease of transition into the parental role was measured by a respondent's total score on both the negative or crisis items and the positive or gratification items. The responses were scored in the following manner: for the gratification items (which were taken from Russell's checklist), a response of "not at all" was assigned a score of 0, a response of "somewhat" was assigned a score of 1, and a response of "very much" was assigned a score of 2; for the crisis item (which were taken from Hobbs' checklist), a response of "not at all" was assigned a score of 0, a response of "somewhat" was assigned a score of -1, and a response of "very much" was assigned a score of -2. Possible scores ranged from -42 to +26.

Multiple regression (Kerlinger and Pedhazur, 1973) was used to analyze the hypothesized relationship between expectations and ease of transition into the role of parent. While multiple regression was designed for interval-level variables, it may be used even if the data satisfy only the assumption of ordinal-level measurement (Labovitz, 1970).

Education, sex, age, occupation and length of marriage were used as control variables in the analysis. These variables were selected for two reasons. First, previous studies of the transition to parenthood had found these variables to be significantly related to the crisis or gratification of parenthood (Dyer, 1963; Hobbs, 1965, 1968; LeMasters, 1957; Russell, 1974). It seemed advisable to control the effects of these variables in order to examine more closely the hypothesized relationships. Second, these variables,

were, in many cases, correlated with the independent variable; again it was necessary to control for the effects of these variables to examine the hypothesized relationship. In order to examine separately the effects of these variables, a hierarchical, step-wise regression procedure was employed.

RESULTS

Hypothesis: There will be a positive relationship between pre-natal expectations and ease of transition into the role of parent.

When ease of transition into the parental role was regressed on expectations of the parental role, a significant relationship emerged in the hypothesized direction (see Table 1). The hypothesis is therefore accepted.

Additionally significant relationships were found between ease of transition and two of the control variables: a positive relationship between age and ease of transition and a negative relationship between education and ease of transition (see Table 1). Interaction effects were examined, and were not found to be significant ($F = .79$, $df = 14, 35$).

Since the average ease of transition score was 6, with a possible range of -42 to +26, this indicates that, in general, the transition into the role of parent was perceived as a positive experience. This finding would be expected, due, in part, to the age of the child at the time of the parent's evaluation of the parental experience. Previous studies which had explored the experience of first-time parenthood yielded different results. These differences may be due to the age of the child at the time of data collection In those studies in which the child was over two years old, the transition to parenthood was reported to be a negative or "crisis" experience (Dyer, 1963; LeMasters, 1957). However, in those studies in which the child was less than one year old at the time the data were gathered, this negative experience of parenthood was not reported (Hobbs, 1965, 1968; Russell, 1974). Since data for the present study were collected when the child was six weeks

old, a positive perception of the parental experience is consistent with the findings of similar research.

The finding that age is positively related to ease of transition into the parental role seems logical. It would seem to be more likely that parents who are relatively older are more ready to assume the responsibilities of the parental role. There is a negative relationship between education and ease of role transition. Perhaps this is due to more educated people desiring more individual fulfillment and, so, having a negative reaction to the physical constraints and time demands of caring for an infant.

The hypothesized positive relationship between expectations of parenthood and ease of transition into the role of parent was found. It appears that expectations of an experience color a person's perception of that experience. A person who has lower or negative expectations toward the parental role, or who feels pessimistic about being a parent, is likely to have a negative perception of the experience of becoming a parent. A person who has higher or positive expectations toward the parental role, or who feels optimistic about being a parent, is likely to have a positive perception of the experience of becoming a parent.

Perhaps this is due largely to the "self-fulfilling prophecy" (Merton, 1968): a person's expectations of a situation determine, in large part, the outcome of that situation. These findings seem to fit that explanation, since expectations of the role was a strong determinant of perception of the experience of becoming a parent. It is also possible that expectations are an attitudinal component of anticipatory socialization, in which expectant parents take on the (perceived) values of parents and make an easier adjustment to parenthood.

In further studies, additional attention could be paid to the function of role expectations in role transition, perhaps to examine further the process by which expectations of the parental role affect one's experience in that role.

Examination of the time factor would be worthwhile. It might shed some light on this process of role transition to have data collected from the same couples at various points after the birth of the child. If this could be continued until the child was two or three years old, this could be used to clarify the presently discrepant findings. The necessary changes involved in the continual adjustment to the role of parent could be examined and better understood.

TABLE 1. Regression Analysis of Ease of Transition on Expectations of Parental Role

Variable	Raw Regression Coefficient	Standardized Coefficient	F-Value
Education	-1.4730	-.3954	8.6905**
Age	1.6112	.4912	16.4286***
Female	-1.5825	-.0743	.3162
White Collar	.6387	.0300	.0382
Blue Collar	- .5896	-.0213	.0210
Expectations	.3696	.2951	6.9635*

R^2 = .3967

* = $p < .05$
** = $p < .01$
*** = $p < .001$

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